Caught in the Act

Cliff: he's nearly rocking

THIS YEAR will be remembered for, among other things, the renaissance in both respect and popularity of Cliff Richard, when on the album "I'm Nearly Famous" he finally acquired a bunch of excellent songs perfectly suited to interpretation by that beautifully textured voice.

But unfortunately I don't think that he has got anywhere near achieving the same balance between MOR tweeness and rock authenticity on stage. His show at London's Royal Albert Hall on Monday night emphasised that he's not quite ironed those problems out.

Not that it was by any means a disastrous gig. Richard was in good form and proved outright that he has the warmest voice and presence of any British singer, and when it is put to proper use, the effect is really spinechilling.

But did he have to use an 11-piece backing band that, apart from the three backing singers, plays the music with lacklustre enthusiasm? At one stage the acoustic guitarist in the axe trio looked so bored that I thought he was going to nod off.

Cliff, I felt, could have operated much more effectively with a smaller select band that would have had a better chance of creating the warm atmosphere he thrives on. We could also have done without the bland medley of "Let Your Love Flow," "Wouldn't It Be Nice" and "Listen To The Music" which closed the first half, and the rock 'n' roll selection which ended the night. Again, both suffered from pedestrianism on Cliff and the band's part, though it pleased his middle-aged audience.

Richard was at his magnificent best and his most committed on, unsurprisingly, the newer material, particularly the softer poignant songs when his intense involvement wove a uniquely intimate air — especially on "Miss You Nights," one of his best songs, when he displayed a freshness that most of the night lacked. — HARRY DOHERTY ★

JOHNNY WATSON

THE GUITAR HERO stakes is such an overworked concept that it seems almost poetic justice to overact it outrageously to the point of parody. Johnny Guitar Watson, in his Saturday night concert at Hammersmith Odeon, did just that; so much so that the visual spectacle of him playing his guitar (every which way provided perfect diversion for anyone finding his music more than a little bland. And I suspect, judging by the rush for the doors before he came back for an encore, that quite a few people did.

The r & b pedigree of a man like Watson — he was one of the first to re-define the use of harmonics in the electric guitar, inspiring the later work of Hendrix for one — is such that the "living legend" tag still always remains valid. The temptation, however, is consistantly to make much more than a mere passing gesture towards that legend, until it becomes positively threadbare; Watson's performance showed a basic uncertainty of emphasis that again and again reverted back to the old guitar gymnastics at the expense of some hard, straight-ahead instrumental themes.

True, the last time he toured Britain was eleven years ago, so that the games were fresh for an entirely new music generation; but even so, such superficial gimmicks hardly create, as they say, a basis for further discussions. It's a truism that, because of its versatility of expression, the electric guitar ideally lends itself to such gadgetry.

The results on this occasion were a slick medley of the old and new, with Johnny Rexing his muscles as new disco soul star while glancing over his shoulder at the old roots music and his famed guitar heroics. "Gangster Of Love" was the original way, far superior to the Steve Miller cover and the "Cuttin' In" hit were the only tracks actually to surface amid the guitar tricks. For the rest, "I Don't Want To Be A Lone Ranger" at least kept a soul feel, "Ain't That A Bitch," "Superstar Lover" and "I Need It" from his latest album all blandly arranged and hardly taxing enterprises for his band, the Watsonian Institute, a surprisingly colourful outfit despite the muted performance on the "Ain't That A Bitch" album.

The audience likewise seemed unsatisfactorily split down the middle, between those relentlessly party-partying in the aisles to "I Need It" (sung three times) and those who had come for guitar chainsaw massacres and got only two golden oldies from his virtuoso days. A sorry tale. — MAUREEN PATON.

LOUDON WAINWRIGHT

LOUDON WAINWRIGHT III was once characterised by an American critic as a comic poet with the potential to become the Charles Chaplin of rock.

But Wainwright, as those who have followed with any discrimination his six-album career will recognise, is much more than an entertaining humourist. As he so emphatically proved at his concert last Friday at London's New Victoria Theatre, he is a social commentator of distinctive humanity and perception. His best songs, unrivalled by the majority of his contemporaries for their pertinence and insight, express often quite ruthlessly, our collective weaknesses and confusions. There is always an abundance of humour in these compositions, of course. But Loudon's wit is acid and testing and somehow makes bearable those investigations of intimate emotions. Songs like "Kick In The Head," painfully explicit account of a husband's realisation that his wife has been sleeping with his best friend, which otherwise would be quite intolerable in their naked emotional sweep.

These songs, performed invariably with a beguiling charm that occasionally disguises a prevalent bitterness, touch a common nerve. Most writers would shrink from such a public display of their personal inadequacies and few could, like Loudon, articulate with such precision emotions felt at some time by all of us, whether we would like to admit it or not.

There are, of course, moments of respite in his performance. Loudon is capable of playing it for laughs as well as tears, and he takes every opportunity in confronting us so provocatively with our inconsistencies and failings. A new composition concerning a pair of stuffing was full of delicious ironies and the gratuitously violent fantasies of "Clockwork Chartreuse" were delivered with delightful, burlesque relish.

But it was those songs dealing with universal themes of loneliness, unrequited love and desperation — like "Motel Blues," "The Hardy Boys At The Y" and, most especially, the epic "The Man Who Couldn't Cry," arguably his most ambitious composition — which he handles with an uncommon sensitivity that remain most vividly in the memory.

He's an extraordinary talent, believe me. He should not be overlooked at any cost. ALAN JONES.

MAN

AS THIS was to be my last opportunity of seeing Man, and on their home stamping ground of Cardiff, I had expected the gig to come coated with a certain amount of nostalgia and sentimentality.

After all, they've been around a good few years, covered almost every patch of the country, and over that time have had their moments. However, I had to report that there was little evidence of either sensation, as by the end of their set I could have cheerfully knocked all their heads together and dug their grave myself.

It's not hard to see why they've decided to call it a day or to be more accurate, have had it forced on them. For despite attaching little significance to attendance figures, you cannot ignore the plain fact, that at Bristol's Colston Hall the previous week they managed to attract no more than 300, and, worse still, last Friday in a town where one would expect them to enjoy a large and partisan following, there were plenty of gaps in the smallish University Hall.

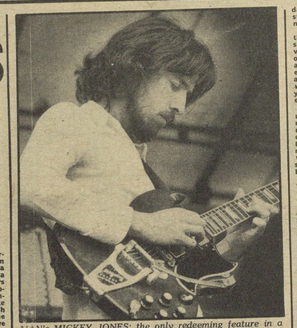
More important, however, is that musically they've stood still over the last couple of years, and it's significant that their older pieces, in particular "71353," "C'Mon" and "Hasannas," still occupy large sections of their set, as well as providing the few highspots. Despite recent attempts to beef up their material, principally as outlined on their last album — "Welsh Connection," and although there were at least versations on the seemingly endless riffing that dominated a year or so ago, their music remains dated and mostly dull.

Whether through tiredness, or more likely a lack of motivation, I know not, but I can never recall having either heard, or seen them perform in such a lacklustre and unenthusiastic manner as this gig, with the soul redeeming factor being the excellent guitar work of Mickey Jones. And it was indeed as well that the audience were not in full control of their physical faculties, otherwise it might all have ended there and then.—SIMON KINNERSLEY.

BUDDY TATE

THE first solo tour by ex-Count Basie tenor saxophonist Buddy Tate opened last Sunday at the People's Theatre, Newcastle.

Driving performances with the local Mickey Gee Trio were ample evidence that the tenor and rhythm format is far from dead as a viable jazz vehicle. From the opening "Sometimes" a ballad treatment with strong rhythm and blues overtones, to the closing "All Of Me" there was excitement a-plenty, some fast, furious interchanges between tenor and rhythm musicians and a thoroughly satisfying experience of a mainstream musician in full flight.



MAN's MICKEY JONES: the only redeeming feature in a lacklustre concert

Buddy Tate's approach is basically gritty and earthy. True, he mainly features ballads and medium tempo items, but a funky rhythm and blues vein permeates the blues, but especially plays the blues, but especially plays the blues, but especially plays any rock 'n' roll rocks and rolls any rock 'n' roll saxophonist in the business.

This is not to suggest an insensitive approach, for he also shows on "Body And Soul," "I Can't Get Started" and "Satin Doll" that he can develop themes with subtle melodic variation and superb taste. The emphasis was mainly on the relaxed fullsome and earthy blues that built up superb climaxes. — CHRIS YATES.

FLAMIN' GROOVIES

"WE WERE into punk a long time ago, but we've cleaned up a bit since then." The speaker was John Wilson, singer with the Flamin' Groovies, his throat still a bit hoarse from the virus infection which had laid the whole band low less than a week before, and the audience was a group of students at Uxbridge's Brunel University on Friday night.

If punk means sloppy musicianship and tacky stage presence (if both may be dignified by such descriptions) then the Groovies aren't really punk.

But clean or not, the Groovies are clearly punk in the old meaning of the word, which had nothing to do with technical expertise or neo-sexual poshgo, more to do with the creation of happy music for bopping to, built on tight, neatly crafted songs (remember songs?), but low on eye-bending solos and self-important, portentous content.

They kicked off with a Beatles number, "I Feel Fine," continued with a tune from the Larry Williams songbook, and didn't get into material from their own album until item number three, "Let The Boy Rock And Roll," which was precisely what they did, despite some problems with Cyril Jordan's guitar, which sprung a string on him during the first number.

Though not really getting into their stride until five or six songs into their set, the Groovies had the whole audience up on their feet and jumping around like a crowd of marionettes attached to the fingers of an operator high on speed. It was just enough to keep your feet still when they played.

The vocal harmonies were, understandably, somewhat rough, and Wilson's singing got more and more tortured as the evening went on, but instrumentally they were on neat, it did not matter too much, except when they tried to do the falsetto "ooh" on Beatles numbery like "From Me To You."

No doubt some will sneer at the obvious sixties influences, including their high-lapelled, velvet-collared, Carnaby Street-style mod suits with their drainpipe jeans and the mop-top hair-dos. But there is more than mere revivalism in their Sixties posture, more of a sense of tradition, as becomes obvious with a number like "Shake Some Action."—KARL DALLAS.

STEELEYE SPAN

I NEVER thought I'd see the day when Steeleye Span's music would be the best word to sum up a group's career to date. Steeleye Span. At Newcastle City Hall last week they, of course, ammen excellent, but unusually low key.

The instrumentation sounds with Gordon Haskell extraordinary form on violin — particularly on one number in which guitar was spot on, and Maddy Prior was in fine voice throughout. In little more than an hour on stage, they played all the songs on the fine new album, "Please To See The King" with the surprising exception of the standard-but-tracks, "Drunken Sailor," "Strangers" and "Farewell, Farewell."

The rest of the set came mainly from the previous album — "All Around My Hat," "Thyme," "Four Golden Oldies, and few extra numbers, all controlled and highly impressive run through recent material in true-to-the-record fashion.

Support artist Martin Simpson failed to bring the house down, but he did enough to confirm his growing reputation as an exceptional folk guitarist and fine singer. — PAUL MUNN.

KIKI DEE

KIKI DEE's new tour has undoubtedly gained considerable momentum from her recent number one single "Don't Go Breaking My Heart." But last week's official opening night of the tour at Bristol's Colston Hall was a very special gig; for, after a painfully tense opening number, during which little her set that threatened to fall into tears, completely, she burst into tears, relaxed, laughed, and from then on was quite magnificent.

It would be easy to criticise her for lack of stage presence, with the slightly awkward, almost terse, song introductions, and little obvious charisma. But she possesses the same seemingly simple, yet sophisticated, blend of femininity and charm that makes Kate and Anna McGarrigle such devastating performers, and her mid-set emotional outburst was utterly natural and endearing.

Her handling of the ballad and slower tempo songs has, of course, always been superb. On "Loving And Free" and "I Amourette," she particularly rich interpretations, revealing full, delicate beauty of her voice. However doubts have often been voiced as to her ability to handle the tougher and more aggressive numbers, and the fact remains that her voice lacks the necessary rough texture to become a truly great rock and roll singer.

But after that early and mildly indifferent spell to her set, she never heard her in such sharp form, either on stage or record; in fact that's exactly how I've Got The Music In Me" have been so well performed. Also, "Chicago," a new, bubbling mid-paced song (which I gather will be on her forthcoming album), was another of her unprecedentedly abrasive and stylish fashion. — SIMON KINNERSLEY.

ENTERTAINMENTS GUIDE

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Fri. 26th Nov.: BRECKNOCK, N.W.1
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Friday, November 26
NOTTINGHAM UNIVERSITY
Saturday, November 27
MARQUEE, Luton
Monday, November 29
RONNIE SCOTT'S CLUB
Wednesday, December 1
WESTERN COUNTIES, Paddington
Thursday, December 2
DUKE OF LANCASTER, New Barnet
Sunday, December 5
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Tyner: 'Acoustic is more natural'

from page 44

Bridgewater (reeds), Charles Fambrough (bass), Eric Gravatt (drums) and Guilherme Franco (percussion) is the most unified to date, an almost ego-less ensemble with a forceful group identity. McCoy feels that their upcoming album "Focal Point" is his best in years.

I ask what qualities he looks for in band members, recalling how some musicians have served their apprenticeship with the Tyner group, before moving on to fame and fortune (or at least jazz's low-key approximation of fortune). Most notably, Alphonse Mouzon and Azar Lawrence.

"That's a very difficult thing to talk about," says McCoy, "because very often I don't know. Often, it's as if someone else is dictating who I should get in my band. Maybe I'm talking a little bit on another level, but very often I just don't know.

"But it seems that I'm always sent someone who fees for what I'm doing. Who understands.

"The band I've got now is probably the happiest one I've ever had. They all love playing together, they all respect each other, and they all enjoy each other's company off the bandstand. Which is very, very important. Y'know, we're all friends, which means that we want to work together, as a group, rather than just a bunch of soloists."

McCoy is particularly fond of percussionist Guilherme Franco (or Antonio de Souza Franco, as his passport would have it), who has become the veteran of the group, having been with McCoy since 1973, excepting brief periods with Keith Jarrett and Gato Barbieri in '74.

"He's a very beautiful percussionist. Very musical, and very serious about what he's doing . . ."

He's extraordinarily sensitive, I agree.

"Very, very sensitive," enthuses McCoy, "he doesn't just pick up anything. He's highly conscious of what sound is required at all times; he keeps his attention acutely focussed, on what's ever's happening at any point; and his sense of timing is phenomenal.

"He's got so much knowledge, and draws on so many experiences. Anybody who's played with a symphony orchestra as a classical percussionist, which is what Guilherme did in Brazil, and with Archie Shepp, has got to know a lot. Yeah, he's a very valuable asset, and I'm glad to have him in my band."

It's interesting, I observe, that McCoy's band, an all-acoustic unit, should communicate so powerfully with ears normally attuned to high-decibel rock and jazz-rock . . .

"Yeah, I like an acoustic sound. It's more natural for me. But everybody has their own taste and their own direction and I try not to criticize."

There's a special warmth about acoustic instruments, I say, attempting to draw him. A certain warmth that electric instruments seem to lack.

"Yeah! Yeah! Acoustic music really has that! I think that can be said without being hostile . . . I think the electronic system somehow blocks the communication between a musician and his instrument. It gets in the middle there, somehow. It's sort of an unnatural energy.

"But then again, I have, on rare occasions, heard electronic music used effectively, so a sweeping generalisation would not be too helpful."

But McCoy has precious little sympathy with multiple keyboard artists: those who have stacks of Fender Rhodes pianos clavinets and Mini-Moogs piled on top of the Hammond like some spaceship console.

"It's just not necessary. It's the person you came to listen to, right? Not the gimmicks, not his gadgets. The person . . ."

When Tyner wants to bring an extra colour into his music he looks, inevitably, to more natural sounds. He owns a couple of Japanese kotos, a full-size (six foot-plus model and a smaller one that he occasionally plays on stage. Then, in the studio there's the harpsichord (used, effectively on "Tristeti"), and more frequently, on live dates, a dulcimer, several wooden flutes, recorders and small percussion (he inclines particularly to a beaded cabasa, borrowed from Guilherme).

But all these, he says, are simply a means to mood-setting. He declines to cast himself in the role of the Great Jazz Orchestrator, even though two of his albums — "Song Of The New World" and "Fly With The Wind" have featured jazz solos in string settings.

Such ideas, he says, are just one-off projects, little asides which embellish the sweeping path of his real development, exemplified by his regular groupwork.

"I've got plenty more ideas like that, though," he admits with a grin.

"I'd really like to try an album with voices. Using a very large African choir . . ."

Would Milestone Records care to finance such a large-scale work, though?

"Oh, I don't think there would be any problems. I have a very good relationship with them. Orrin Keepnews (McCoy's producer) and I work very closely together, and nobody dictates to me at all.

Not that McCoy Tyner would let them, anyhow.

Entertainment Guide

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